

# Everything Is Permitted: Artist-Run Spaces of Mexico City in the 1990s

by Stan Mir on January 2, 2016



*Francis Alÿs, "Re-enactments" (2000–01), two-channel video installation, 5 minutes 23 seconds (image courtesy the artist)*

PHILADELPHIA — In the early 1990s, Mexican artists Daniel Guzmán and Luis Felipe Ortega recreated and recorded on video a selection of works by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and Paul McCarthy. They relied only on written transcriptions. Like many artists of their generation, they had to self-educate, because in the decades leading

up to the '90s, art students in Mexico were taught an outdated curriculum, one that skipped large portions of the 20th century and mythologized Mexican history. In response, many artists, including Guzmán and Ortega, chose to “remake” iconic works as they searched for their own traditions.

In the process, they formed artist-run collectives as alternatives to state-run museums and government-funded grants. Guzmán and Ortega were among the co-founders of a space called Temístocles 44; the name was simply the address for a house set for demolition that was owned by gallerist Haydée Rovirosa and loaned out to artists.

In one segment of Guzmán and Ortega’s “Remake” (1992–95), Guzmán recreates a performance from Paul McCarthy’s “Black and White Tapes” (1970–75). With his back to the camera, Guzmán walks into the frame holding a five-gallon bucket of white paint and slowly pours the paint on the floor, forming a puddle that he then pulls himself through. As Cuauhtémoc Medina and Olivier Debrouse, the authors of *The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico 1968–1997* (Turner/UNAM, 2007), describe this time, these artists did not fit Fredric Jameson’s notion of pastiche, or “blank parody.” Instead, their actions became a way of engaging directly with works of art that had been disregarded by the Mexican establishment.

*Strange Currencies: Art & Action in Mexico City, 1990–2000*, a show recently on view in The Galleries at Moore in Philadelphia, featured many of the artists who participated in the communities of alternative spaces that sprung up in the 1990s. Kaytie Johnson, chief curator at Moore, had been thinking about organizing a show with these artists for a few years. To her mind, Philadelphia’s large proportion of artist-run spaces, including Marginal Utility, New Boone, RAIR and Vox Populi, made the city a good fit to host the exhibition. Johnson had no other agenda in her curating than a desire to exhibit work with a similar allergy to the mainstream.



*Eduardo Abaroa, “Obelisco roto portátil para mercados ambulantes” (1993), plastic sheeting, metal and photographic documentation. (image courtesy the artist)*

The drive to remake iconic works during this time manifested itself in a variety of ways. Eduardo Abaroa's "*Obelisco roto portátil para mercados ambulantes (A Portable Broken Obelisk for Street Markets)*" (1991–93/2015), which was modeled on Barnett Newman's iconoclastic "Broken Obelisk" (1963–69), was first displayed in the garden at Temístocles 44, and then, for one day, in an open-air market on Avenida del Imán in Mexico City. Abaroa's choice of materials, exhibition locations, even the name of the work, offer rejoinders to the elitism of High Modernist Art. Abaroa made his work with metal tubing and the pink plastic sheeting used for canopies at street markets, while Newman used Cor-Ten steel for his sculpture. Abaroa wouldn't have had the privilege of steel. For *Strange Currencies*, "Obelisco roto" stood at the entrance to Moore. Because the original "Obelisco roto" was ephemeral, Abaroa had to remake his own work — this time with yellow sheeting — something that he was hesitant to do. According to Johnson, Abaroa didn't see the point; for him, remakes are "refugees." To be re-created for an art exhibition, the obelisk loses its site-specific and subversive edge. This, however, should not be seen as a shortcoming in the version exhibited at Moore; museums, after all, are established to preserve historical documents and provide fodder for future works of art.

Neither the story of this exhibit, nor the inspiration for Mexico City's artist-run spaces, neatly begins on January 1, 1990. Johnson told me the spirit of this show really began to unfold on September 19, 1985, the day of the Mexico City earthquake that registered a magnitude of 8.0. The official death toll was reported as 10,000, but other reports that suggest it was many times larger. President Miguel de la Madrid did not address the people until 36 hours after the quake, and even though the military was dispatched to aid victims, many citizens, out of necessity, took it upon themselves to pull bodies from the rubble. Several of the artists included in *Strange Currencies* were in Mexico City at the time and participated in efforts to help those in need. From Johnson's point of view, this energy translated into a do-it-yourself approach to art, which developed as the 1990s began.

One of the first spaces to appear in Mexico City was Mel's Café, a makeshift cantina co-founded by Melanie Smith and Francis Alÿs. Smith and some friends moved to Mexico from England in 1989 after finishing art school at the University of Reading. As Smith described in an interview with Alison Hearst published in the catalogue for the exhibition [\*México Inside Out: Themes in Art Since 1990\*](#) at the The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, they were looking for a place to produce work outside of the repressive atmosphere of the Thatcher administration.

Later in the interview Smith contrasts her decision with the more common route for freshly minted MFAs, seeking entrée into a hierarchical gallery system. Mexico, or at least the circle she moved in, was less institutionalized and provided artists with more control. Within a short time after her arrival, Smith was exhibiting work at El Salón des Aztecas, an experimental art space founded by Aldo Flores in 1988.

Alÿs, who was born in Antwerp and trained as an architect in Italy, moved to Mexico City after the earthquake to help rebuild the city as part of his Belgian civil service requirement. Once his service was finished, he stayed. Smith met Alÿs in the scene that developed there. In 1991, they opened Mel's Café in Smith's studio, because they needed an income. On Sundays, they would set up a few tables, invite a bartender, and occasionally host informal exhibitions. In this environment, artists could display more conceptual and installation-based work that didn't participate in the establishment's painting-centric discussions.

*Strange Currencies* included work by both Smith and Alÿs. Smith's "Orange Lush" (1995/2015) hung in a large window facing the Barnes Foundation on Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Smith's work, roughly 10.5 x 20.5 feet, is made entirely of orange plastic items made in China and purchased in Mexico City street markets, including toilet

seats, spray bottles, salad spinners, and rafts. Orange became ubiquitous in Mexico's post-NAFTA, neoliberal '90s and, for Smith, came to represent consumerism. At night, Moore left the window with "Orange Lush" lit, a taunting and pleasantly garish contrast to the Renoirs, Cézannes, and Picassos that dominate the Barnes collection and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which sits just up the parkway from Moore.

Much of Alÿs's work is action-based. His strongest work in the show was the video "Reenactments" (2000), in which he buys a 9mm Beretta at a black market, loads it, and then proceeds to walk the streets of Mexico City with the gun visibly at his side. He's leisurely whistling all the while, which helps to build some of the tension. By performing an activity that's bound to raise more than a few eyebrows, Alÿs one-ups the ludicrous image of a 19th-century flâneur walking a turtle; it's not merely eccentric, it's insane. After several minutes, the police arrest him. He then pays these cops to help him reenact the same activity the next day, a twist that reveals not only the corruption of the police, but also, in the artist's ability to walk freely holding a gun, a destabilized sense of social permission. The viewer, in the chilling final product, sees a split screen with the initial performance on the left and the reenactment on the right, seemingly posing the question, which resonates with a deeper ring of truth?

A few years before the founding of Mel's Café, Carlos Salinas de Gortari was elected President of Mexico. It's ironic that Smith traded Thatcher for Salinas, who was a member of the PRI, the ruling party since 1929. As he cozied up to George H.W. Bush and other Western world leaders, Salinas managed to deregulate roughly 200 state-owned companies, ranging from airlines and telecommunications to garbage collection. This brought enormous profits to a small number of people, among them Carlos Slim, who was ranked by *Forbes* as the richest man in the world from 2010 to 2013.

Salinas also helped to initiate NAFTA. Although he campaigned against corruption, he wasn't able to do much to change Mexico's institutional culture. A prominent politician and businessman at the time, Carlos Hank González, coined an apt phrase, "A politician who is poor is a poor politician." Under the president's leadership, the country experienced an unsustainable economic bubble that led to the devaluation of the peso, a decline in foreign investment, and mass unemployment. Salinas, who holds a PhD from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, is also suspected of being tied to the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, a PRI presidential candidate; his brother, Raúl Salinas, served 10 years in prison for allegedly ordering the murder of Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu, another member of PRI.



Vicente Razo's "*Museo Salinas* (Salinas Museum)" (1996), reminiscent of the religious shrines found throughout Mexico and the American Southwest, responds to this era with appropriate sarcasm. Razo also puts a unique spin on the notion of the alternative space, originally installing the *Museo Salinas* in his bathroom. In the version at Moore, there was a photo of the bathroom that shows a variety of toys, Salinas-Chupacabra masks, and figurines, most of which were purchased in Mexican street markets. The artist, in *The Official Museo Salinas Guide*, provides the following reasoning for this work:

[...] considering the torpid state of Mexican museums — immersed in a colonized and elitist agenda, with an atrophied bureaucratic corps, and fearful of confronting the smallest figment of reality — I decided that it would be a healthy and necessary act to preserve these original testimonies of contemporary Mexican history in the space of a museum: I wanted to 'activate' these objects.

Discussions of Mexicans in the United States are often constricted by political rhetoric focusing on immigration and the drug trade. An exhibition like *Strange Currencies* pokes holes in such belittling comments as it challenges the narrative of a white, U.S.-dominated art world.



*Miguel Calderón, "Empleado del mes #6 (Employee of the Month #6)" (1998), chromogenic print, 80 x 50 inches. (image courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City)*

Works like Miguel Calderón's series *Empleado del mes* (*Employee of the Month*) (1998) push viewers to enlarge their understanding of Mexican society. In Calderón's photographs, the artist draws attention to the custodians and museum guards at Mexico's National Museum and the disparity between their quotidian labor and the exalted realm of the historical paintings they protect, portraying the workers in poses that mimic the paintings' imagery.



*Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okón, "A Proposito" (1997), video still. (image courtesy the artists)*

Calderón and Yoshua Okón, who was also featured in the show, founded La Panadería in 1994 as an artist-run gallery and performance space in Mexico City. The name honors its location, literally translating as "bakery." In "*A propósito* (By the Way)" (1997), a collaborative video installation by Calderón and Okón, the artists steal a car

stereo, a process they learned just for this project. In front of the video's wall projection was a wide stack of 120 car stereos, only one of which was the stolen stereo; the others were purchased on the black market. (This stereo stack reminded me of Billy Dufala's "Copper Bale," 2015, which was recently exhibited at Fleisher/Ollman in Philadelphia. Both works use materials that are prone to theft and resale on the black market.)



*Yoshua Okón, "Poli IV," Oríllese a la Orilla, (1999–2000), video still. (image courtesy the artist)*

On one level, I understand Calderón and Okón's idea of adrenaline-fueled, action-based art as a critique of a disenfranchised culture, but what are the implications of the artists' active and passive participation in the black market? Calderón and Okón are doing more than exposing the mechanics of theft — they are also aestheticizing it. "*A propósito*" walks a line between exploitation and critique, and calls to mind Hassan I Sabbah, the Islamic mystic often cited by William S. Burroughs as inspiration for his work, who once wrote, "Nothing is true. Everything is permitted."

"*Poli IV (Police IV)*" (1999) from Okón's video series, *Orillese a la orilla (Pull Over to the Side)*, continues in the same spirit. The footage consists of a uniformed cop twirling a baton, grabbing his crotch, and flexing his biceps, while staring deadpan into the camera. Okón had seen this cop twirling his baton on the street, and then paid him 200 pesos, currently about \$12 US dollars, to do the routine in Okón's studio. For other videos in the series, the artist, in a strangely benign variation on Alÿs's bribes, paid officers, in uniform and on duty, to dance, stage arguments, and tell jokes. Some think of Okón's work as strictly provocative, but in a discussion moderated by Arden Decker, also published in Forth Worth's *México Inside Out* catalogue, Okón frames his art this way:

[...] I never think of my work [as provocative]. I just think we are very numb as a society. We think of ourselves as freethinkers, but we are incredibly conventional and our behavior is mostly predictable. The moment that content in art is not in line with dominant perceptions, many people see it as confrontational or as a provocation. I am not a punk. I am not trying to provoke for the sake of provoking or to destroy without attempting to build. I work within a humanist tradition, and try to engage in a conversation in order to collectively rethink who we are and how we live.

After a while, the officer in "*Poli IV*" started to look like an actor auditioning for a cop-fetish porn movie. I walked away thinking the cop wouldn't get the part, but that he got something better: the opportunity to perform his routine on an endless loop in Philadelphia, Monday through Saturday, between the hours of 11:00 and 5:00 PM, with an additional three hours on Friday evenings.



*Gustavo Artigas, “Discurso” (1994), audio installation with corn masa, altered audio cassette, paper, ski masks and headphones, dimensions variable. (image courtesy the artist and Itala Schmelz. Photo: Mariana Rodríguez)*

Gustavo Artigas’s “*Discurso* (Speech)” (1994/2015), like Abaroa’s “Broken Obelisk,” was meant to be ephemeral. It had been exhibited only once at La Panadería, on December 1, 1994, the first day of Ernesto Zedillo’s presidency. For *Strange Currencies*, Artigas, again like Abaroa, recreated the work, which he considers a “Dada poem,” after some hesitation. “*Discurso*” is truly mixed media, with its baker’s table covered in corn masa, a tape deck at one end, and balaclavas hanging from coil cords beside the table.

There is a sensor that triggers the deck to play clips from presidential campaign speeches through earphones inserted inside the balaclavas, which were used as masks in the mid-'90s by the Zapatista commandant Marcos and his rebel army. Johnson, the curator, pointed out that visitors are encouraged to wear the masks while listening to the speeches, and reminded me that the Mexican police are now protecting their own identities by wearing balaclavas. Viewers might also associate the masks with the IRA or even some images of ISIS. Abaroa, in this work, combines the quotidian (corn masa on a baker's table) with the political (the masks and the speeches) to underscore the bleeding of one into the other.



*Teresa Margolles, "Tarjetas para picar cocaína (Cards to Cut Cocaine)" (1997–1999), color photographs and twelve laminated cards, dimensions variable. (image courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich)*



Teresa Margolles, another artist involved with La Panadería, focuses her critique on another area of the Salinas legacy: the drug trade. Under his presidency, the cartels ramped up their operations and increased profits. The death toll from drug-related killings also went up. Margolles's "*Tarjetas para picar cocaína* (Cards for Cutting Cocaine)" (1997-99) is perhaps the most viscerally disturbing in the exhibit. It consists of laminated, card-sized photographs of drug-trade victims in the morgue. In these photos, faces are swollen and bloodied beyond recognition.

The card-sized photos alone are innovative, but Margolles pushed her work more directly into the public realm by taking the cards to nightclubs and art world parties, where she distributed them, knowing that they would find their way into the hands of users. Margolles then photographed clubbers and party-goers using the cards for cutting coke; some potential users were actually disgusted and refused the cards. The artist enlarged these party photos to accompany the cards in the exhibit.

"Cards" is a project that falls in line with some of Margolles's earlier work with the death metal collective, SEMEFO, a Spanish acronym for Mexico City's central morgue. The group drew inspiration from the Vienna Actionists, a transgressive, performance-based collective formed in the 1960s, and La Fura del Baus, a Catalanian

theater group founded in 1979. In the Moore exhibition, SEMEFO was represented by “Lavario fase I” (1992), an actual exhumed coffin hanging upside-down from a hook and wrapped in chains. Surprisingly, as Rubén Gallo points out in his book, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Margolles’s work has not drawn much attention or furor, even though it has been exhibited, even in the ‘90s, in state-run museums. In contrast to Margolles’s murder victims, Daniela Rossell’s series *Ricas y Famosas* (*The Rich and Famous*), (1999) has been criticized in Mexico for its depictions of upper-class life in a country where an overwhelming percentage of the population lives below the poverty line.

Rossell, whose family is part of the PRI elite, and who has exhibited work at La Panadería, caused a media frenzy when her photographs were first exhibited, as if, Gallo suggests, Mexicans are more disturbed by wealth than death. It seems clear that these photos, while glamorous, are pointed criticisms of the elite, but Rossell denies that she was critiquing anyone. In one, “Untitled #23” (1999), the setting is a lavishly decorated living room, with polished family portraits and a full-size taxidermied lion on the floor.

Notably, we see the animal in profile, catching sight of its testicles, while a beautiful blonde woman, Paulina Díaz Ordaz, who happens to be the stepdaughter of Raúl

Salinas, rests her foot in his mane. Gripping a tennis racket, she's dressed sportily in a white miniskirt and a yellow off-the-shoulder shirt that reads "Peep Show, \$1.00." In "Untitled #14" (1999), a dark-skinned housekeeper seems to be awaiting her next order from a blonde woman splayed on the couch. The camera's overhead vantage takes in most of this lavish room and emphasizes the racially charged relationship between the two women.

All of Rossell's subjects volunteered for these photos, and when they were first exhibited, the artist refused to identify who had posed for her. Paulina Díaz Ordaz chose to identify herself after Rossell published the photos in a book. As Gallo describes the episode, Díaz Ordaz was insulted "because [the photographs revealed that her family, contrary to her assumptions, was not] the richest or the most famous in Mexico." It seems to me that Rossell was being coy about her intentions with these photos.

How could she not have realized they would ruffle some feathers?

As an outgrowth of independent spirit, some of the artists affiliated with Temístocles 44 and La Panadería formed SOMA, an independent art organization, in 2009.

According to its [website](#), SOMA was "conceived to nurture discussion and exchange in the field of contemporary art and education in Mexico City" and to "provide a forum for

dialogue between Mexican and international artists, cultural producers, and the public at large.” It offers a two-year educational program geared towards dialogue between young artists and more established professionals, not the promotion of one’s career as an artist.

An exhibition such as *Strange Currencies* should remind viewers of the importance of making art outside of established methods or venues; the irony, however, is that by stamping the work as historical, the show runs the risk of suggesting that these Mexico City artists have always held the status of museum recognition.

Many of them have certainly achieved international renown since the ‘90s, but fame isn’t the point of their art. More relevantly, these artists ran their own venues in order to create work that did not conform to the expectations of their political culture or their art world. In artist-run spaces, whether they’re in Mexico City or Philadelphia or Bucharest, astute individuals recognize the potential that can be unleashed when freed from the constraints of the market — artists, not institutions, grant the permission, and they determine what’s true.

[Strange Currencies: Art & Action in Mexico City, 1990–2000](#) was on view at *The Galleries at Moore College of Art & Design (20th Street and The Parkway, Philadelphia)* September 19–December 12, 2015.